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SUBJECT: BELGIAN MUSLIMS: IDENTITY AND INTEGRATION AMONG
POST-IMMIGRANT GENERATIONS

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[1](#)C. BRUSSELS 1087

[1](#)D. BERLIN 1067

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Classified By: Political Counselor Theodore H. Andrews; reasons 4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: As in other western European countries, Muslims in Belgium have reached the stage where, despite years of residence, they feel - and are often perceived as -- strangers in their own, albeit adopted land. Of primarily Moroccan and Turkish origin, Belgian Muslims seek increasingly to balance their cultural and linguistic roots with efforts to integrate into the country's dual-cultural/-linguistic native population. Islam is the second largest faith in Belgium, far behind Christianity. With discernable ethnic physical characteristics as well as prejudice from large parts of the populace, Muslims have a sharpened sense of "distinctiveness" accentuated by the number of women who wear the "hijab" headscarf and ethnic neighborhoods of unemployed youth. There is a noted absence in the life of Islam in Belgium of broader cultural traditions such as literature, humanism and science which defaults to an ambient practice of Islam pervaded by a more conservative salafi interpretation of the faith. Moroccan and Turkish Belgians live in separate communities; Turkey and Morocco provide official support - imams and language teachers respectively - to their communities to encourage a sense of connectedness with their country of origin. The headscarf is a periodic political issue, particularly in the important Flemish city of Antwerp. Slowly, new breakthroughs by younger Belgian Muslims into the political and business arenas, combined with a high birth rate, portend either gradual integration or continued ostracism that could result in greater radicalization. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) Muslims compose more than five percent of Belgium's 10.6 million population - up to 700,000 persons - primarily of Moroccan (285,000 to 500,000 according to the Moroccan ambassador) and Turkish (160,000) origin; the remainder comes from the Balkans, South Asia and Arab nations. This total includes the estimated number of illegal and third-generation immigrants and naturalized citizens as well as more recent refugees fleeing the Balkan and Iraqi wars. Turkish workers first arrived between the world wars and during a 1960-70's economic boom when Moroccan immigrants also appeared to work in Belgium's coalmines, settling in Brussels and southern

francophone Wallonia. Immigrant rates dropped sharply in 1974 when the government imposed stricter rules on foreign labor but remained liberal on family reunification. That same year, Islam was officially recognized as a subsidized religion but lacked a centralized body apart from the Saudi-financed Grand Mosque. Today, one in five residents of Brussels is Muslim - half of the Moroccan-origin community; most of the remainder live in Wallonia; half of the Turkish-origin live in Flanders, with the largest concentration in Ghent. However, only ten percent are estimated to practice their faith. In Belgium's bi-cultural society, assimilation takes place largely at the regional level; whereas Moroccan Muslims arrived with at least notions of French, Turkish-origin Belgians who do not know French revert to Turkish to communicate when in francophone Brussels or Wallonia. This fact reinforces their identity as a separate community.

13. (U) Discrimination in housing and employment has produced clear lower-class "ghetto" areas of greater Brussels, such as Molenbeek, Scaarbeek and St. Josse, disproportionately inhabited by Muslims regardless of their education and income. According to the OECD, unemployment among foreign-born residents is twice that of indigenous Belgians. Muslims also have higher birth rates, with the result that a third of Turks and Moroccans are under 18 compared to less than a fifth of native Belgians. A quarter of Brussels residents under 20 are of Muslim Origin and an estimated fifty percent of Muslim youth in Brussels is unemployed.

The "Hijab"

14. (U) The "hijab" headscarf is common apparel of both Turkish and Arab women in Brussels. Yet, the decision last October by Antwerp's city government to ban its wearing in public schools and by civil servants who deal with the public has produced growing divisiveness on the issue. In practice,

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acceptance of the "hijab" has been left to the individual school principal to decide. However, in 2006, two teachers in the Brussels school system were dismissed for wearing the headscarf. A higher court rejected their appeal, agreeing with the school board's argument that it needed to remain neutral in matters of religion. According to news reports and contacts with human rights officials, many Antwerp-based artists and public figures support the Muslim women's freedom of choice in dress; those who supported the mayor last year now chastise him because of this issue. Leading female politicians of immigrant origin who initially endorsed the headscarf ban now argue that the city has no business dictating what women wear. The anti-immigrant far-right Vlaams Belang party cites the uproar to show that immigrants are unwilling to integrate. A study released in May 2007 by the francophone Catholic University of Louvain's (UCL) Center of the Psychology of Religion concluded that disdain for "the nature of certain groups" lies at the heart of the "ambient racism" found in Wallonia and the Brussels area. Seven of ten persons interviewed termed the "hijab" a sign of submission; a third called it "anti-western"; 23 percent a "provocation"; only a fifth saw it as an "expression of liberty."

Organizing...Yet Separate

15. (C) Unique in Europe, the government of Belgium subsidizes the country's seven officially-recognized religions - including Islam - at the federal, regional and local levels. After Christianity, Islam is the second largest faith in the country. The Muslim Executive (ME) was established in 1996 by an act of Parliament as the vehicle through which public funds would pass to the country's 350 mosques (50 in Brussels) which, unlike Christian churches, have no natural hierarchical conduit. State security screens the 68-person membership of the Muslim Executive's General Assembly. The 2007 federal budget line provided for Belgian Muslims is 6.7 million Euros (USD 8 million, or 6.3 percent of the total

amount distributed to faith or laic organizations). According to ME President Coskun Beyazgul, one million Euros have passed to the Muslim Executive for its administrative costs, while the Ministry of Justice disburses the rest directly to imams who preach in mosques throughout the country and/or service prison inmates. On June 19, the Walloon regional government gave legal recognition to forty-four mosques, which are thus able to receive direct regional public funding. (The designation had been delayed pending the delineation of clear ME guidelines required by both regional governments by which mosques should qualify for official financial support.)

¶6. (SBU) Turkish-origin Muslims dominate the ME leadership following a Moroccan boycott of its 2005 elections. Some Moroccan-origin Muslims have claimed that their Turkish counterparts are "agents" of the Turkish government. (Note: The charge has a certain resonance as a result of the local Turkish embassy's strong pressure on Turkish community members to participate in the Muslim Council elections. End note) Turkish-origin ME members respond quietly that the Moroccans have used these accusations as a fig leaf for their own inability to organize enough to do well in the vote. The disparate nature of the larger Moroccan-origin community would substantiate the difficulty of winning such a vote. In early 2007, fierce in-fighting between ME Turkish and Moroccan communities led to accusations of theft and the brief arrest on corruption charges of the previous (Moroccan-origin) president. ME President Beyazgul was accused by many Moroccan-origin Muslims, including academics, of being "employed" by the Turkish embassy. The ensuing public scandal prompted recognition by many in the Muslim community, especially Moroccan-origin academics, that they needed to transcend communal differences and work together to advance their common interests of integration and bi-national identity. There is no indication of follow-through to this suggestion.

¶7. (C) Indeed, cultural differences between Moroccan- and Turkish-origin Belgians are reflected in their relative degrees of integration into the general Belgian society. Those of the Turkish community explain that they have an easier time integrating than their Moroccan counterparts because like Belgium, Turkey is an organized, secular democracy with a distinct entrepreneurial class. There are several Turkish ethnic organizations, such as the Intercultural Dialogue Platform (IDP), which hosts cultural

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and religious events, on such occasions as Ramadan and the Prophet Mohammad's birthday. A diverse group of political leaders, including Yves Leterme, the likely next prime minister, faithfully attend IDP-sponsored events during the Ramadan and Eid seasons. IDP also organizes local-language classes in both parts of Belgium and helps with administrative problems of its community. IDP's former president said Turkish-origin Belgians are found across both Flemish and Wallon small commercial and export/import sectors. Its modern office-apartment indicates that it is well-funded. When asked, its former president acknowledged that the idea of including non-Turkish Muslims in IDP activities had never occurred to him; he did not appear to warm to the idea.

¶8. (C) Similarly, Morocco's ambassador rejected the suggestion that the two major Muslim communities might gain strength and lessen the atmosphere of prejudice toward Muslims by co-mingling. He cited basic linguistic and historical differences between Turks and Arabs. Moroccans find jobs in modest service sectors as taxi/tram drivers, restaurant/cafe workers, hotel or hospital staff or as store employees, his consul-general said. Moroccans also appear more readily associated in the minds of the Belgian public with the unemployed and gangs - the most active being at Brussels South train station (Gare du Midi).

Foreign Government Support

¶9. (C) Foreign governments are central to the religious practice of Belgian Muslims in many of the some 350 mosques nationwide (50 in Brussels), which also tend to separate national/ethnic Muslims between Arab and Turkish origins. Since 1969, when Brussels, Saudi-built Grand Mosque was opened during a visit by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia has continued to furnish Korans and support the needs of even non-Arab mosques on request. Through its embassy in Brussels, Turkey has since the 1980,s assigned imams from "home" to Turkish-frequented mosques for three-to-four-year tours. The current number is sixty-two. According to a Turkish member of the Muslim Executive, the teaching of religious education by "motherland" imams tends to alienate or radicalize practitioners who have grown up in Belgium's western culture and who react against the strictures of a religious leader from a less open, "foreign" homeland. This has led to a growing gap in religious practice, particularly between generations. The Egyptian and Moroccan governments also sponsor imams. An effort by the Muslim Executive to have imams trained in a Belgian university fell apart in early 2007 when the university decided to offer instead a general "Islamic studies" course. A Ministry of Justice decree recognizing imam "candidates in training" is expected to be issued soon, Beyazgul said.

¶10. (C) Religious or "moral" instruction is mandatory in Belgian schools and determined on the basis of the religious or non-religious preference of the student. The government appoints teachers from nominations received from the religious body in question. In the case of Islam, this method of selection has in practice left the interpretation of Islam to the individual instructor, producing what one western Islamic scholar called an "ambient Islam that seems pervaded by conservative salafi interpretations of the faith." As to language instruction, Morocco has sent over 200 teachers to teach Maghrebin Arabic in Belgian public schools so that students of Moroccan background learn the language of their country of origin.

¶11. (C) Saudi Arabia continues as a source of material support to the Islamic community. A member of the Muslim Executive told us that the Saudi embassy keeps mosques furnished with Korans and help with such material needs as mosque upkeep and repair.

Political Inroads

¶12. (SBU) Muslim-origin Belgians are gaining a foothold in politics across Belgium, according to the results of both national elections on June 10, 2007 and municipal elections of October 2006. In the October 2006 local elections, 145 foreign-origin candidates won seats on local councils in the nine Brussels communes - an increase of 30 percent over the year 2000. At an embassy Iftar dinner shortly after the vote, some Turkish- and Moroccan-origin guests acknowledged

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that community loyalty was a primary factor in how they voted, i.e. Turkish- or Moroccan-origin voters cast their ballots primarily for candidates from their own community, while others dissented, noting that some legislators were elected in majority-Christian districts. In Belgium's complex list voting system, a person who placed seventh on a list can in fact win first place if there are enough individual votes in his/her favor. Such was the case of Derya Tucki, who heads the "Turkish Lady" association.

¶13. (U) In the national elections of June 2007, of the 186 Turkish- and Arabic-name candidates who ran, a single Christian-Democrat was the only one returned to power. The Muslim names appeared primarily on the lists of left parties who were the major losers in the vote. However, an anonymous appeal the week before elections for Muslims to boycott the poll (voting in Belgium is mandatory) appears to have been

ignored.

¶14. (U) Among the new generation of Belgian Muslims who are clearly on their way up in Belgium's politics and public life is the impressive young Turkish-Belgian Emir Kir. A francophone socialist, Kir is Brussels Region Secretary of State for Environmental Issues, i.e., head of the patronage-rich ministry that handles refuse removal and the cleaning of public parks and monuments. A charismatic up-and-comer, Kir sees himself - and wants to be seen - as Belgian, not Muslim. In this, he is echoed by many other Muslim politicians, a group that mixes well with others of the country's political class. Asked recently if he had to choose between Turkish and Belgian citizenship for reasons of military duty, he said he would choose the latter. Despite this attachment, Kir nonetheless attends to his ancestral constituents at Turkish community festivals. At the same time yet in a different function, Wallon Minister of Education, Culture and related matters Fadila Laanan sees one of her roles as maintaining a bridge between Belgium and her family's country of origin Morocco. She assures that Belgian works are part of the annual Casablanca book fair and is active in a Belgian-Moroccan group in her ancestral homeland. Like Amir, Laanan represents the francophone Socialist Party (PS), the political group that can count on the majority of support from the country's immigrant community. The PS was the big loser in the recent national elections; however both Amir and Laanan are in their positions until 2009, for a total of six years.

¶15. (U) Public actions linking Belgium with radical Islam are few, but still worrisome. Most notable - and embarrassing for the country - was the death in November 2005 of Belgian citizen Muriel Degauque near Baghdad following her suicide bombing attempt. Degauque, 38, had converted to Islam, the faith of her Moroccan-origin husband who had died in a terrorist attack in Iraq. She was the first European woman to become a (failed) suicide bomber. Non-Muslim leaders have pointed to this event as one reason why those elected to the Muslim Council are vetted by the state security organs.

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